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### IRQ102990.E

Iraq: Overview of the situation of Christians; violence against Christians in Baghdad and the North; displacement; government protection; situation of the Christian minority in the Kurdistan region (2003-2008)  
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#### Christians in Iraq

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Iraqi census of 1987 showed 1,400,000 Christians living in Iraq, but in 2006 it was estimated that there were fewer than 1,000,000 Christians living in Iraq (UN Aug. 2007, 59). The United States (US) *International Religious Freedom Report 2008* estimates the Christian population as 550,000 to 800,000 people out of Iraq's 28.2 million, down from 800,000 to 1,200,000 in 2003 (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 1). Similarly, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reports that there are 500,000 to 700,000 Christians in Iraq (RFE/RL 17 Apr. 2008). Sources estimate that Iraqi Christians account for three percent of Iraq's overall population (IWPR 17 May 2006; *The Chicago Tribune* 24 Nov. 2008). Iraqi Christians are members of several sects including the Chaldeans (an eastern sect of the Catholic Church), Assyrians (Church of the East), Syriacs (Eastern Orthodox), Armenian Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (UN Aug. 2007, 59-60; US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 1), Syriac Catholics and Roman Catholics (UN Aug. 2007, 59-60). The Christian communities are primarily located in Baghdad and in northern regions such as Mosul, Erbil, Dohuk, Kirkuk (UN Aug. 2007, 60; US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 1) and Sulaymaniyah (UN Aug. 2007, 60).

#### Security of Christians

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Christians have been targets of violence, which sources primarily attribute to Islamic extremists, including al-Qaida in Iraq, or criminal gangs (IWPR 7 Aug. 2007; UN Aug. 2007, 60, 65). The UNHCR reports that the "security environment and political climate has steadily worsened for religious minorities in Iraq since the 2003 toppling of the former regime" (UN Aug. 2007, 61). The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), a not-for-profit international network promoting free and fair media (IWPR n.d.), notes that while millions of Iraqi citizens live in fear, Christians are "especially vulnerable" because of their religion (IWPR 7 Aug. 2007). Media sources quote the Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk as stating that Christians are the "target of a campaign of liquidation" (AFP 10 Oct. 2008) and that Christians in Mosul are fleeing "ethnic-religious cleansing" (RFE/RL 15 Oct. 2008). The director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, an international policy research organization based in the US (Hudson Institute n.d.), similarly states that

Christians and other minorities in Iraq "are being targeted in a ruthless cleansing campaign" (*Charlotte Observer* 20 Aug. 2007).

Minority Rights Group International (MRG), the UNHCR and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) report that Christians have been the targets of killings, kidnappings, attacks, harassment and intimidation in Iraq (MRG 2007, 10-11; UN Aug. 2007, 61; RFE/RL 17 Apr. 2008). Multiple sources provide details on incidents where Iraqi Christians have received death threats urging them to leave their homes or risk being killed (US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 2c; UN 30 June 2007, Para. 30; HRWF 18 Apr. 2007). According to MRG and media sources, businesses such as liquor stores, owned by non-Muslims, have been bombed or forcibly closed down and their owners have faced threats, attacks and killings from extremists (MRG 2007, 8; *Houston Chronicle* 11 Nov. 2007; *The Miami Herald* 6 July 2008). MRG notes that other traditionally Christian-owned businesses such as gymnasiums, beauty parlours, music shops and recording studios are also targets (MRG 2007, 8). Human rights groups, the UNHCR and the US *International Religious Freedom Report 2008* report that many women, including Christians, comply with Islamic dress codes to avoid threats, harassment and the risk of being raped, abducted or killed (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2; MRG 2007, 11, 23; UN Aug. 2007, 65; AI Mar. 2008, 2).

Christian churches, schools and convents have been attacked (MRG 2007, 9; UN Aug. 2007, 61; *The Washington Post* 22 Apr. 2008). Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) lists over forty churches or convents in Iraq that were bombed or attacked between 26 June 2004 and 4 June 2007 (HRWF 8 Jan. 2008). The majority of these attacks were in Baghdad; there were also a large number in Mosul and a few in Kirkuk (ibid.). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2008* gives details on many attacks, including ten reported bomb attacks of Iraqi churches and convents that occurred in January 2008 in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2). A number of churches in Iraq have closed because of these threats (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2; IWPR 7 Aug. 2007).

## **Violence in Baghdad**

HRWF reports that 25 bomb attacks were aimed at Baghdad churches between 2004 and 2007 (HRWF 8 Jan. 2008). MRG provides details on several attacks, including an incident where car bombs exploded outside six churches at the same time in 2006 (MRG 2007, 9).

*Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007* lists incidents where Christian civilians and clergy have been the targets of kidnapping for ransom in Baghdad (US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 2c). In 2007, Babel College and the church of St. Paul and St. Peter, the only Chaldean seminary and college in Iraq, were reportedly moved from Baghdad to Erbil in the Kurdistan region of Iraq because several priests on staff had been kidnapped (Asia News 4 Jan. 2007; HRWF 18 Apr. 2007).

According to HRWF, in April 2007 an Islamic group threatened Christian Assyrians in the Dora [or Doura, al-Dora] district of Baghdad with death if they did not convert to Islam within 24 hours (HRWF 18 Apr. 2007; ibid. 14 Apr. 2007). According to this source, a *fatwa* (religious edict) was issued against Dora Christians allowing for the confiscation of Christian property, forcing Christian women to veil themselves and forbidding wearing crosses or making the sign of the cross (ibid.).

On 6 April 2008, an Assyrian Orthodox priest was shot and killed outside his home in Baghdad (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2; *The New York Times* 6 Apr. 2008). *The New York Times* reports that his mourners believe he was targeted because he was wearing his religious garments (ibid.).

## **Violence in northern Iraq**

Several sources report on incidents where Christians have been kidnapped, killed or threatened in northern Iraq, especially in and around the city of Mosul (*Christian Science Monitor* 6 Mar. 2008; IWPR 7 Aug. 2007; MRG 2007, 10).

HRWF reports eight attacks on churches in Mosul prior to 2008 (HRWF 8 Jan. 2008). In one example, the Chaldean Catholic Church of the Holy Spirit in Mosul was the target of a rocket attack on 27 September 2006, and a group of men opened fire on the same church eight days later (ibid.). IWPR indicates that Mosul used to have 23 churches but that many have closed because of attacks on the churches and clergy (IWPR 7 Aug. 2007).

IWPR and MRG report that Father Boulos Iskandar [also spelled Paulos Iskander or Paul Alexander (MRG 2007, 10)], a priest from the Syriac Orthodox Church, was kidnapped and decapitated in Mosul in October 2006 (IWPR 7 Aug. 2007; MRG 2007, 10). The kidnappers demanded that the priest post apologies for comments by Pope Benedict XVI about Islam (IWPR 7 Aug. 2007; MRG 2007, 10). In June 2007, Father Ragheed Ganni, a Chaldean priest, and three deacons were killed in Mosul (AI Mar. 2008, 6; IWPR 7 Aug. 2007; US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 2c). Sources also report that kidnappings of ordinary Christians have taken place in Mosul (IWPR 7 Aug. 2007; *Christian Science Monitor* 6 Mar. 2008).

Media sources report that on 29 February 2008, Paulos Faraj Rahho, archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Mosul, was kidnapped after gunmen killed his three companions (*The Guardian* 14 Mar. 2008; *Christian Science Monitor* 6 Mar. 2008). His body was found several weeks later (*The Guardian* 14 Mar 2008; US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2). *The New York Times* reports that American military officials suspect that Archbishop Rahho may have been killed because he stopped paying insurgents protection money for the Christian parish (*The New York Times* 26 Jun. 2008).

IWPR reports that in October 2008, "at least" seven Christians were killed and three Christian homes bombed in Mosul (IWPR 20 Nov. 2008). According to some media sources, about twelve Christians were killed in Mosul during this time (Reuters 28 Oct. 2008; *The Guardian* 25 Oct. 2008; *The Times* 27 Oct. 2008). In November 2008, two Christian sisters were killed and their home was bombed (IWPR 20 Nov. 2008; Reuters 12 Nov. 2008).

HRWF reports that three civilians were killed in an attack on the Church of Mar Giwargis in Kirkuk on 2 November 2005 (HRWF 8 Jan. 2008). Two churches in Kirkuk were targeted by car bombs on 29 January 2006 and another three civilians were killed (ibid.).

## **Displacement**

According to UN figures, there are approximately two million Iraqis displaced within Iraq and almost two million people who have fled Iraq, mainly to Syria and Jordan (UN 2 May 2007, 3). According to UNHCR figures quoted by the

US *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, 16 percent of registered refugees in Syria and Jordan are Iraqi Christians and 5 percent of Iraq's internally displaced population are Christian (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 1). Christians constitute 38 percent of the 19,664 Iraqis who registered with the UNHCR between 17 March 2003 and 31 January 2007 in Jordan and 34 percent of the 45,150 who registered with the UNHCR between 21 December 2003 and 6 February 2007 in Syria; however, the report also notes that the percentage of Iraqi Christians registered with UNCHR is likely higher than their actual proportion in the host states (UN Aug. 2007, 60). According to the Chaldean Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Baghdad, as quoted by Catholic News Services in 2006, half of Iraq's Christian population has fled Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003, and 75 percent of the Christians from Baghdad have fled to other parts of Iraq or abroad due to the violence in Baghdad (Catholic News Services 3 Aug. 2006). Many internally displaced Christians have fled Baghdad or Mosul to the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq (IWPR 7 Aug. 2007; *The Times* 27 Oct. 2008).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2008* cites Christian leaders as saying in press reports that 500 Christian families fled the Dora district of Baghdad during April and May 2007 (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2). UNAMI cites church sources as saying that by the end of June 2007, 1,200 Christian families had been displaced from Baghdad after receiving death threats and witnessing killings (UN 30 Jun. 2007, Para. 29).

The UN estimates that in October 2008, more than 2,000 Christian families (13,000 people) in Mosul, representing half of the city's Christian population, fled from their homes because of threats and violence (UN 26 Oct. 2008; IWPR 20 Nov. 2008; Trend News Agency 3 Nov. 2008). Families fled to churches and homes in nearby villages, to Iraq's Kurdish region or to Syria (*The Times* 14 Oct. 2008; *The Guardian* 25 Oct. 2008).

## **Government protection**

The new Iraqi constitution guarantees "full religious rights" to Christians, Yazidis and Mandaean Sabaeans, but also states that "no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam" (US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 2c; MRG 2007, 26). The constitution provides anti-discrimination protection in Article 14: "Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, colour, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status" (MRG 2007, 27; US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2).

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has made statements supporting Iraq's Christian minority and denouncing attacks against the Christian community (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 3). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2008* reports that there are two Christian ministers in the Prime Minister's cabinet and that the Iraqi parliament includes Christian representation, but many non-Muslims, including Christians, complain of being "disenfranchised, marginalized and not adequately represented" (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2).

On 8 November 2008, Iraq's presidential council approved a bill guaranteeing 6 of 440 provincial council seats to Iraqi minority groups, half of what the United Nations (UN) had proposed (The Canadian Press 8 Nov 2008; *The New York Times* 9 Nov. 2008; AFP 8 Nov. 2008). Three of the seats, one each in Baghdad, Nineveh and Basra, are for Christians; the UN recommendation was for a total of seven for Christians (The Canadian Press 8 Nov. 2008; *The New York Times* 9 Nov. 2008).

In October and November 2008, media sources reported that Iraqi government officials had pledged to send additional security forces to Mosul and offered monetary support to returning Christian families who had left following killings and threats to the Christian community (*The Times* 14 Oct. 2008; AP 31 Oct. 2008; Trend News Agency 3 Nov. 2008; IWPR 20 Nov. 2008).

### **Christian minorities in Kurdistan region**

The Kurdistan region has been a destination for internally-displaced Christians (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2; KRG 5 Nov. 2008; Finland 7 Mar. 2008, Sec. 6.1). According to Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), 20,000 Christian families have settled in the Dohuk and Erbil governorates since 2003 (KRG 5 Nov 2008). This number could not be corroborated among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. KRG Prime Minister Barzani has stated that Christians are welcome in the Kurdistan region and that the government is assisting Christians with employment, rebuilding 100 villages and helping families by providing monthly stipends (*ibid.*). A fact-finding mission to this area by the Finnish Immigration Service also notes that Christians have been welcomed by the local population and that the situation for Christians "resembles something like a normal life" (Finland 7 Mar. 2008, Sec. 6.1).

However, some Iraqi Christians in the Kurdistan region have complained of a lack of employment and opportunities (VOA 16 Sept. 2008; Finland 7 Mar. 2008, Sec. 6.1). According to the Finnish fact-finding mission, the cost of living is high and the monthly stipend (approximately 80 US dollars) lasts only about four days; there are also shortages of kerosene, water, electricity and accommodations (*ibid.*).

According to the Chaldean Culture Society, only Christians with sponsors are able to settle in the Kurdistan region (*ibid.*). The US *International Freedom of Religion Report 2008* and the IWPR report that the KRG has confiscated the property of Christians and that there are allegations of discrimination against non-Muslims (US 19 Sept. 2008, Sec. 2; IWPR 7 Aug. 2007).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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